


Article

Why There Is a Place for Dialogue in Religious Education Today

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Abstract: Recognising the plural nature of classrooms in Australia, this article explores the importance of using dialogue within Religious Education classes. We explore the characteristics and learning styles of young people and provide students' ideas about Religious Education gathered from small focus groups of students aged 10–18. We also provide students' ideas about God, gathered from survey responses, that could be deepened through a dialogical approach. Finally, we explore ways for teachers to incorporate a dialogical teaching and learning approach within a catechetical, didactic curriculum.

Keywords: dialogue; religious education; student voice; pedagogy and curriculum

1. Introduction and Overview

"I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:22–23).

In exploring dialogue in Religious Education (RE) today, this article considers the characteristics, needs, and desires of the students in the classroom for the world they are living in. With the move in some dioceses back to a kerygmatic, catechetical approach to RE, we would argue that now more than ever there is a need for dialogue within the pedagogy. The diversity of classrooms in Australia and the nature of young people today, and the world they live in, highlights the need for and importance of dialogue.

The concept of dialogue in teaching is not new (Cui and Teo 2020). Since the time of Socrates (470–399 BCE), teaching through asking and answering questions has been a pedagogy encouraging critical thinking and development of ideas. Contemporary education continues to use dialogue to foster learning. In the RE classroom, this dialogical methodology reflects the synodal nature of Church Pope Francis is calling for (Marmion 2021). Synodality requires dialogue, which involves mutual listening, creating a space where every student can be heard and respected.

The document, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, from the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, commonly referred to as the Synod on Synodality (Francis 2024), saw synodality as transforming situations including educational institutions, to make them more participatory, inclusive, and mission-driven. Further the document underscores the importance of listening to children. "The voice of the child is needed by the community. We must listen to children and make efforts to ensure that everyone in society listens to them, especially those who have political and educational responsibilities" (Francis 2024, n. 61). Strengthening dialogical teaching practices particularly using synodal processes enables students to practice meaningful dialogue. This hopefully provides them with the confidence and skills so that they can be heard. A Church can better respond to contemporary challenges and fulfil its mission of evangelization if all members are participating in dialogue.



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While we see dialogue as essential for both catechesis and evangelization, it is also essential for humanity and the development of a peaceful and compassionate world ([Admirand 2019](#)). Recent wars in Ukraine and Palestine highlight the important role of dialogue on the international stage. Closer to home, the recent walkout at a graduation ceremony, because people did not like the views of the occasional speaker, demonstrates a lack of tolerance for people with opposing views. For greater cooperation and tolerance of others, the skills of dialogue and reflection need to be developed in the classroom. As well as acknowledging the importance of dialogue for our world, it has been found that students prefer to engage in classes which are dialogical ([Diocese of Sandhurst Review Committee 2018](#)).

How do we understand dialogue?

Dialogue is seen as an essential skill for young people to enable them to exist in our complex world of interconnections ([TBIGC 2017](#)). Dialogue is an interchange between two people where each learns from the other ([TBIGC 2017](#)). It is described as an encounter where people come to understand each other's lives, values, and beliefs ([TBIGC 2017](#)). To be able to dialogue, students need to learn the skills of respecting, listening, speaking clearly and confidently, explaining their beliefs and points of view, critical thinking, reflecting, responding, questioning, cooperation, global awareness, religious literacy, and living with difference ([TBIGC 2017](#)).

Dialogical approaches in the general classroom have been found to positively support the learning and engagement of students, encourage deeper thinking, student-initiated questions, and multiple perspectives ([Oldehaver 2023](#)). They also enable the incorporation of culturally relevant materials and multiple modes of communication, which can be particularly effective in diverse classrooms ([Oldehaver 2023](#)). Studies have found that secondary students who were taught to use dialogical discussion practices showed higher levels of interaction and engagement. This increased interaction was linked to better learning outcomes and greater student involvement ([Davies and Meissel 2018](#)). More specifically, in the RE classroom the use of dialogic space supports the exploration of relationships and encourages a participatory and egalitarian learning environment ([Moate 2011](#)). Evaluation of the use of dialogic strategies in a secondary school RE classroom found that dialogic teaching facilitated better teacher–student and student–student interactions, fostering critical thinking and engagement ([Vrikki et al. 2019](#)).

Pope Francis spoke of the importance of a “culture of dialogue” in his address to Catholic Schools and Universities ([Francis 2017](#)). While exploring Catholic Identity, the Congregation for Catholic Education also emphasised the importance of dialogue for the promotion of a peaceful society ([Congregation for Catholic Education 2022](#)). Dialogue was identified as an essential part of Catholic schools, with its roots in the dialogue of the Trinity, the dialogue between God and people, and the dialogue between people ([Congregation for Catholic Education 2022](#)). The congregation identified identity formation, respect for diversity, understanding others, self-expression, trust and harmony, and the transformation of “competition into cooperation” as the fruits of authentic dialogue ([Congregation for Catholic Education 2022](#)). It could be argued that dialogue, and specifically interreligious dialogue, is part of the evangelizing mission of the Catholic church and Catholic school and has been specifically since Vatican II ([Engebretson 2009](#)). As we enrol students of all faiths and no faith, dialogue can promote humility, sincerity, and honesty amongst students and teachers engaging in mutual listening and learning ([Admirand 2019](#)). This dialogue can support students' exploration of the meaning of life and of living together and the formation of their own identities ([Boeve 2019](#)). In the Catholic school it is essential that the Christian voice is included, offering a particular lens with which to explore the world and relationships, not just a narrow set of values ([Boeve 2019](#)).

The world and education today

The traditional model of schooling developed during the industrial revolution was to prepare children for work within nation-states. This one-sided instructional model of schooling is not adequate to prepare children for a world which is volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (Andersen 2020). Due to technology and travel, children now live in a globalised and much more connected world and have greater access to information (Cush and Robinson 2014).

It is tempting to think that a didactic Catechetical approach which was successful in the “glory days” of the early twentieth century might reverse the trend of young people not participating formally in the practices of the Catholic Church; however, the students being educated today are very different to those in Catholic schools at that time. According to the National Catholic Education Commission, from humble beginnings over 200 years ago, Australia’s 1756 Catholic schools now educate 820,000 or one in five Australian students and employ over 112,000 staff.¹ Today around 32.5% of all Australian students are educated in faith-based schools, and Catholic schools are the major provider of faith-based education in the country, enrolling about 60% of students in the non-government sector. Approximately 40% of students in Catholic schools in Australia are not of the Catholic religion.

Based on recent research conducted by KU Leuven in Victorian schools, along with data from the National Catholic Life Survey and the census, it is evident that current RE efforts aimed at evangelisation and fostering commitment to the Catholic Church are largely unsuccessful for most students. To become active and responsible community members, students need to learn how to engage in dialogue with people who hold different opinions (Admirand 2019).

In considering the RE curriculum and pedagogy, we need to consider the type of education Australian schools have been encouraged to provide over the last couple of decades. In the Adelaide Education Declaration (DETYA 2000), The Melbourne Education declaration (MCEETYA 2008), and the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration (DESE 2019), goals have encouraged schools to develop learners who are confident, creative, active, questioning, inquisitive, and experimental. Students are supported to “think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way” (MCEETYA 2008). In the most recent declaration, students are to be taught to “engage in respectful debate on a diverse range of views” (DESE 2019).

The Australian Curriculum includes the general capability of critical and creative thinking (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2022).

“Critical thinking involves students analysing and assessing possibilities against criteria for judgement. They construct and evaluate arguments, and use information, evidence and logic to draw reasoned conclusions and to solve problems”.

“Creative thinking involves students learning to generate and apply new ideas, and see existing situations in new ways. They identify alternative explanations and possibilities, and create new links to generate successful outcomes”.

Since students are encouraged to think critically, ask questions, and apply reason and judgment across their curriculum areas, it is reasonable to assume they will want to use these skills also in RE. However, without proper guidance and information, their reasoning in this subject will be limited. Therefore, when designing classroom pedagogy, we need to consider how to create a multi-faith learning community.

Although primarily considered at the tertiary level, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition emphasizes “the conviction that faith and reason are mutually illuminating and that each discipline offers the potential to reveal the sacred” (Boston College 2025). The curriculum and pedagogy of primary and secondary schools needs to prepare students to engage with theology and philosophy in the search for meaning.

Who are young people and how do they learn?

Setting aside the question of curriculum content for the moment, let us examine who we are educating and how they learn. To design an effective curriculum and pedagogy in any subject area, it is crucial to consider not only the material to be taught, but also the characteristics of the learners and the perceptions of the educators (Drummond 1998). There are several ways of perceiving childhood and these impact the type of education they receive (Dillen 2015). From an international perspective, children and young people under the age of 18 have several rights, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which Australia became a signatory to in 1990 (United Nations 1990). These include:

Article 12: Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 14: Children have the right to think and believe what they want and to practice their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Parents should guide children on these matters.

Article 29: Education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full. It should encourage children to respect their parents, their cultures, and other cultures. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national, and religious groups, and persons of indigenous origin.

Children do not come to school as empty vessels or “not yet adults” but rather as competent subjects with knowledge, wisdom, questions, beliefs, and experiences (Dillen 2015). Young people today are looking for personal choice, freedom, flexibility, and an expectation that things will not stay the same (Dillen 2007). Childhood is a social construction which in Australia is currently impacted by globalisation, secularism, and pluralism.² As well as the impact of culture, children are impacted by the educational choices made by governments, teachers, and school leaders. Given the hopes and expectations of the ministers of education over recent years, as outlined above, what do the students in the classrooms today want and expect?

Christian and Jewish students involved in research in the UK indicated that their religion classes stereotyped and misrepresented religions and presented religion in a very boring manner (Moulin 2011). They complained that religious studies did not present religion in a contemporary and meaningful way. A key concern of students in the UK study was about being picked on for their religion, indicating the need for all students to have the skills of dialogue. In recent years, considerable attention has been given to student voices. Pope Francis in his address to schools and universities said: “It is necessary to listen to the young: the ‘work of the ear’. Listen to the young!” (Francis 2017, p. 2). Student voice and agency begins as young as early childhood education (Grajczonek 2015).

2. Student Voice

2.1. Study 1: What Young People in Australia Say About RE

So, what do young people in Australia say about RE? As part of a review of the RE curriculum in one diocese in Australia, a sample of students from across the diocese were asked to participate in unstructured, in-depth interviews in groups of five to six students. Students from five secondary schools were chosen to reflect the differences in size, location, contexts, and student bodies of the diocese, while seven primary schools were chosen using systematic sampling.³ Students came from years 5–12. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into student experiences of and desires for RE.

The conversations with the secondary students covered a range of topics and those of interest to this discussion were:

Does RE have relevance in your life?

How could we improve RE?

Your ideal RE Teacher

The secondary students presented mostly positive views of RE although some felt that RE was less important than other subject areas and took time away from more important learning, in later school years. However, they were able to identify the personal development lessons of RE such as “It’s good to be engaged in RE, integrate our deeper thinking and feelings”, as well as gaining a deeper understanding of others, “Respect other’s opinions and beliefs, be inclusive, understand other religions, know that Catholicism isn’t the only belief”.

Secondary students recommended areas for improvement in RE. They wanted to learn about the Bible in an interesting way and raised concerns about the repetitive nature of scripture passages chosen by teachers. The students expressed a desire for teachers to integrate the things students like such as creativity, music, writing, charitable works, and “hands on” activities. Importantly for this article, students expressed a strong desire for discussions and bringing in their own thoughts, reflections, and feelings. Students wanted more opportunity for active responses to their faith and connection to their lives today.

The secondary students’ ideal teacher echoed their desires for an interactive pedagogy in RE. They described a teacher who creates a relaxed classroom and encourages discussion, who is open, listens, encourages, and respects students to share their opinions without passing judgement. They wanted this teacher to be passionate, motivated, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and interested in what students think. They also wanted teachers who believed and were witnesses to the faith and/or brought in witnesses as guest presenters.

The conversations with primary students covered seven themes. The questions of interest to this discussion are:

Does RE have relevance in your life?

What are some of the positive things you have done in RE?

How could we improve RE?

Can you describe the ideal RE teacher?

Primary students also presented with mostly positive views of RE and were able to articulate its relevance for their lives. Students identified knowledge, direction, social action, understanding, meaning, values, and virtues as the positive impact of RE. Students particularly enjoyed learning about other religions and cultures. They preferred activities that involved creativity, thinking, and engagement. They expressed support for open discussions and opportunity for differing opinions. They also liked the practical application of the faith in social outreach. These students were positive about learning about topics such as the Bible, Sacraments, the Church, and prayer.

Despite their positive support for RE, the students had ideas for improvement. They desired more involvement with and discussion of the Bible. Students observed that teachers used a very restricted range of Bible stories, and their presentation was dry and serious. They wanted more opportunity for research, projects, creativity, presentations, involvement, movies, and witness from adults. Most importantly for this paper, they were keen to have more discussions and opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas.

When asked about the ideal RE teacher, they wanted them to be respectful, enthusiastic, open-minded, and knowledgeable about RE. They wanted teachers to provide interesting activities and be interested in what students think and encourage discussion and deep thinking. They also expressed a desire to be able to make decisions about their own faith.

In short, students expect their learning experiences in RE to be as interesting, well-planned, and pedagogically sound as all their other subjects. They also expect that their teachers will be knowledgeable in the subject and engage them in deep and meaningful discussions about Religion and the meaning of life.

2.2. Study 2: Student Responses Indicating a Need for Dialogue

In other research exploring children's understanding of God, a group of 11- and 12-year-old students and their parents agreed to the students responding to questions about God on a written survey (Larkins 2021). The questions were:

1. Who is God?
2. Where and when do you find God?
3. How does knowing God make a difference to your life?

This research formed part of a Masters project and approval for this research was given by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee. These students were also part of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Research Project. Their results on the Post Critical Belief Scale⁴ indicated that as a group they were high in post critical belief. However, the individual student responses to the questions about God identified some literal belief and some children with magical thinking about God and how God acts in the world. The children's responses highlighted the importance of dialogue and discussion with students, to explore their thinking and to help them to come to a deeper understanding of the transcendent. It was concerning that although, as a group, the students were high in Post-Critical Belief, if left unexplored by teachers the beliefs of individual students could lead to children abandoning belief in God when they experience difficulties, and God does not intervene in the way they expect. This also points to the importance of inviting older students to understand negative theology or not knowing: the idea that as humans we cannot truly know God or have the language to describe the transcendent but are better able to say what God is not (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020).

3. Discussion

How Teachers Can Incorporate a Dialogical Teaching and Learning Approach Within a Catechetical, Didactic Curriculum

There is some reasonable argument for an explicit curriculum in the particularity of the Catholic faith, especially given that many teachers are coming to the classroom with a limited background in the faith (Larkins et al. 2022; Franchi and Rymarz 2017) and even those with a little knowledge are fearful that they may teach the wrong thing (Madden et al. 2022). It is consequently essential for these teachers to also be given the opportunity to experience dialogue in this space. Although many have limited backgrounds, teachers are keen to develop their understandings (Sturt-Buttle 2019). Systems, school leaders, and teacher education programs can support teachers in this space through offering appropriate professional development and curricula that support this approach. The development of teachers for this approach has been addressed in detail in other books and articles (Mercieca and Rennie 2023; Madden 2020; Poncini 2024).

This article is not questioning the content of RE curricula but rather the pedagogical approach to engaging young people in the RE classroom and providing opportunities for an encounter with Christ. For some time, leaders in this area have identified the need for the pedagogy of the RE classroom to be as interesting and effective as for all other areas of the curriculum (Grajczonek 2015). We would advocate for an approach which includes theologising with students. This approach involves "faith seeking understanding".⁵ A theologising approach would allow for a systematic study of humans understanding of God, and allow for questioning and exploration of ideas. This would allow for a movement

from an intuitive acceptance of belief in the transcendent to a deeper understanding. It might also involve doubt seeking understanding as young people grapple with their ideas about God, life, and their own sense of meaning and purpose.

Firstly, a change of attitude may be required in both timetabling practices in some schools as well as some teachers' attitudes to subject delivery. RE requires that teachers have the same passion, knowledge, and confidence to teach RE as to teach other subject areas. In an ideal world, they would also be people of faith. Teachers of RE with sufficient confidence in their subject are able to teach without fear. This was supported by the students' views of an ideal RE Teacher. Teachers would benefit from having the skills for dialoguing themselves to teach and implement this type of pedagogy. Planning for RE is most effective in teams with at least one expert in the area. Lessons should incorporate the range of best practice teaching and learning strategies available. Curriculum developers and system leaders can assist teachers by providing theological background to units of work and related enduring questions.⁶ Students are an excellent resource for providing ideas about the ideal RE classroom. Above all, students need to be given the time and space to explore their own ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and questions. This requires teachers to be confident in their own positions and the position of the Catholic Church in areas that are important for their students. The plural nature of classrooms provides the impetus for moving from a catechetical approach to RE to a theologising approach. This gives students the opportunity to explore the religious tradition as a valuable legacy (Dillen 2007). While the curriculum guides content, teachers can be alert to the big questions that students are grappling with in their everyday lives.

More specifically, it is important to lay the ground rules for dialogue. The teacher explains how the interactions should take place. As part of the ground rules, students need to learn the vocabulary of dialogue such as questioning, speculating, proposing, negotiating, inviting elaboration, challenging respectfully, and changing their mind. It cannot be assumed that all children would come to school with this vocabulary.

These studies explore students' thoughts about God and perceptions of RE and this article proposes dialogue as a means of improving their experience and learning. The argument for greater dialogue in RE classes could be enhanced and supported by further study, exploring the suggested pedagogical approach and deepening the theoretical understanding and application of dialogic learning. This could be a good opportunity for an action research project involving students and staff as they are most affected.

4. Conclusions

RE is more than a skills- and knowledge-based subject. It is engaged in assisting students to interpret their reality and develop mental models or understandings of the world and the transcendent (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020). A dialogical approach encourages students to be more aware of their interior space and their reasons for holding particular positions in the area of faith and religious belief.

Both Jesus and Saint Paul used a style of teaching which involved storytelling, relating their message to the life of their audience, indicating how their message would make a difference, offering hope, and dialoguing.

Students are not the same as they were in the past and therefore are unlikely to respond to a purely kerygmatic approach to RE. Far from lacking interest in religious and spiritual ideas, young people are interested to explore at a deeper level. Teachers are also not the same and while lacking the immersion in religion of earlier generations they are keen to develop their understandings. They will need much support, confidence, and courage for a dialogical approach.

While curriculum content is beyond the scope of this article, in the review of the Curriculum described above it was decided to include more units about St Paul, the Holy Spirit, and Discernment as a way of helping students and teachers to understand the beginnings of the Church and how we experience God today through the action of the Holy Spirit. The focus of the article has been on the RE classroom however more generally it is time for teachers and leaders in Catholic schools to stop thinking of their curriculum as a state-based curriculum with RE added, to a Catholic Curriculum which ensures that the requirements of the state-based curriculum are covered (D’Orsa et al. 2012). This could be facilitated by including the Catholic view in dialogue within most areas of the curriculum. This would require a formation of teachers to provide them with the background and skills to engage in the dialogue. This could also provide an opportunity for further research.

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Notes

- ¹ National Catholic Education Commission. Up-to-date information can be found on the NCEC website, <https://ncec.catholic.edu.au/>, accessed 12 January 2025.
- ² See (Sharkey 2024) in this issue for elaboration on this topic.
- ³ Systematic sampling is a type of probability sampling method in which sample members from a larger population are selected according to a random starting point and a fixed periodic interval. This interval, called the sampling interval, is calculated by dividing the population size by the desired sample size. This method of sampling is widely used in nation-wide studies of Australian children’s achievements.
- ⁴ Post-Critical Belief is described as the transition from a free-critical, unreflective acceptance of Christian text and traditions (first naïveté—Ricoeur) towards a critically aware, historically attuned relationship with those texts and traditions (second naïveté).
- ⁵ A definition of theology from St Anselm of Canterbury.
- ⁶ See Catholic Education Sandhurst Religious Education site as an example: <https://ceosand.catholic.edu.au/catholicidentity/source-of-life/section-1>, accessed 12 January 2025.

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